

Opinion Piece: This /s High School Today

by Armando Vilaseca, Secretary of Education
(February 20, 2013)

Governor Peter Shumlin wasted no time in getting down to work to improve education in Vermont. In his second inaugural address, the Governor outlined several areas of focus to ensure that Vermont continues to lead in education.

Expanding pre-school opportunities for all kids is a high priority because we know children who enter kindergarten ready to learn are better prepared to be successful in school. The Governor is also dedicated to closing the achievement gap for children whose families struggle financially. His goal of reducing the obstacles for children to receive nutritious breakfasts and lunches at school is close to being a reality. This means that children who are currently receiving reduced rate meals will now be eligible to receive both breakfast and lunch at no cost. For many families the eligibility for receiving free versus reduced-priced meals is the difference of only a few dollars in monthly income. This is the first step in addressing the achievement gap, and as we look to the future we want to ensure free meals for all students in Vermont's schools.

Education is complex and ever-changing, and for this reason the focus of this piece will be on expanding high school opportunities for our kids. First, we need to accept and embrace the fact that high school today is different than it was for most of us. The structure of America's high schools has not changed much over the past 75 years. However, our entire world has changed. How can we expect to get better results using a system that was designed to accommodate an agricultural economy? We have no choice but to make the shift for our students' and our state's future.

High school education today should not be limited to the "school building" but rather high schools should be the conduits for expanding learning and opportunities. This includes virtual learning, internships, dual enrollment, applied learning and aligning graduation requirements to the needs of the state and the country. The Governor supports dual enrollment -- when a high school student takes a college level class while still in high school, earning both high school and college credit simultaneously. Dual enrollment should not be an "extra" but rather an integral part of a high school student's educational opportunities. Dual enrollment provides a powerful college experience for high school students, not just the high achievers, but students who may not otherwise consider post-secondary education. For many students this is an excellent opportunity that can lead them to be the first in their families to go to college.

Students should also have the opportunity of multiple options for attaining a high school diploma. All students should have a Personal Learning Plan (PLP) which helps to focus their education and shape their learning so they see the connection to their future interests. Many students perform well under the current system, but what about the thousands of students who have checked out of school? Those high school students are intellectually and emotionally detached from their education because they do not see a meaningful link between what they are doing in school and what they hope to be doing once they graduate. It is time to make high school more relevant for students and PLPs and dual enrollment are two very effective tools that we can offer our kids.

Additionally, the Governor spoke about students participating in work-based learning and internships as part of the high school experience. All students should be required to participate in an in-depth internship in their area of interest; these experiences will allow them to take ownership of their education and to better understand the connection between school and future job opportunities. The focus of emphasizing career exploration while in high school is not to produce “worker bees” but to provide a comprehensive, relevant, well-rounded and engaging education.

Flexible pathways to learning, dual enrollment, internships, personal learning plans, distance learning - these are some of the education-related highlights that Gov. Shumlin has outlined for our state. We currently have an opportunity to take the first few steps in the right direction that will move education forward in Vermont. You can be part of this positive movement by supporting several bills that are in active discussion with our legislators. A bill currently under consideration by the Senate and House Education Committees is called the Flexible Pathways Initiative. This bill takes advantage of some Next Generation Funds without the need for new revenues.

We owe it to our children and our state to make these changes to our education system. It is imperative that if the Governor’s proposals are to bear fruit, these initiatives must move from a concept to a reality. Please take the time to contact your legislators about this important opportunity for our students and ultimately for our state.

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